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How to cite:

Coleman, James A. (2004). Modern Languages in British universities: past and present. Arts and Humanities in Higher Education, 3(2) pp. 147–162.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

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Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:
<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1177/1474022204042684>

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MODERN LANGUAGES IN BRITISH UNIVERSITIES: PAST AND PRESENT

James A. Coleman, The Open University, UK.

Professor James A. Coleman

Department of Languages

Faculty of Education and Language Studies

The Open University

Walton Hall

Milton Keynes

MK7 6AA

T (01908) 659909

F (01908) 652218

E j.a.coleman@open.ac.uk

Proposed running header:

Modern Languages in the UK

ABSTRACT

This paper profiles Modern Language studies in United Kingdom universities in a sometimes polemical way, drawing on the author's experiences, insights and reflections as well as on published sources. It portrays the unique features of Modern Languages as a university discipline, and how curricula and their delivery have evolved. As national and international higher education contexts change more fundamentally and more rapidly than ever before, it seeks to draw on recent and current data to describe the impact of student choice and to identify trends, particularly with regard to the place of literature.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Jim Coleman is Professor of Language Learning and Teaching at the Open University, having previously taught French at Glasgow and Portsmouth. An author of French language courses and editions of French Renaissance literature, his recent research focuses on language learning in the university sector. More than 80 publications, and over 100 plenaries, conference papers and invited lectures delivered in the UK and across Europe deal among other topics with residence abroad, language testing, intercultural competence, quality enhancement and applications of new technologies to language teaching. He is on the Editorial Board of several international journals, and has played a

role in many national associations and institutions, including the Institute of Linguists, Association for French Language Studies and University Council of Modern Languages. He regularly works as an external advisor to other universities, and has taken part in national quality assessments of both teaching and research.

Key words: higher education; language learning; Modern Languages; university curriculum.

In this paper I seek to paint a portrait of foreign language teaching in UK universities. I attempt to draw together a number of very recent developments and contextual features, in an inevitably risky attempt to discern trends both historically and contemporaneously, at a time of unprecedented, fundamental and accelerating change. Rigby (1999: 241) observes in the introduction to a series of academic autobiographies that ‘there has been little written on the development of French as a discipline’, an observation which applies equally to the study of other languages in higher education. The present study therefore draws as much on the experiences, insights and reflexions of a participant observer as on academic studies of the sector, and could legitimately be regarded as an opinion piece.

Practitioners would argue that Modern Languages are like no other subject taught in universities. The Benchmarking statement for languages and related studies, developed by language academics as a reference document for the UK’s Quality Assurance Agency, asserts: ‘The study of languages and related studies is essentially multifaceted; few other subject areas combine in such an integrated way the intellectual, the vocational and the transferable’ (QAA, 2002: 1). Courses bearing the label ‘Modern Languages’ typically combine the acquisition of a skill – proficiency in a foreign language – with an infinite range of content. The content extends from literary, cultural, linguistic, social, historical, political or other studies pertaining to the country or countries where the target language is spoken and for whose access target language proficiency is normally a prerequisite, to the entire spectrum of university disciplines whose students opt to add generic or subject-related linguistic skills to their overall university curriculum. The professional identities of academics and students in Modern Language departments are so disparate that an ethnographic study memorably portrayed them as rival ‘tribes’ (Evans, 1988: 175-177), with primary allegiances to literary or sociological approaches or to language teaching. I am fortunate that my career has included membership of all three principal tribes, as well as an insider perspective on UK quality assurance processes in both teaching and research.

Foreign language study is itself unique. While requiring cultural and linguistic knowledge – intellectual mastery of new systems – comparable to other disciplines, the learning outcomes expected of a degree-level language student also include a sophisticated practical command of the foreign language. Most language teachers would identify the following distinctive features (the research literature from which the following enumeration is drawn is too copious to cite in detail, but for wide-ranging summaries see Ellis, 1994; Byram, 2000):

- an emphasis on psycho-motor skills in acquiring pronunciation, intonation and fluency: these skills require extensive practice, just as a good tennis player needs to practise rapid, accurate and appropriate responses;
- the blend of conscious and sub-conscious learning by which aspects of the target language system which are initially learnt in an explicit way gradually become automatic (much as they are for a native speaker), whilst other features are acquired directly and unconsciously through extensive, meaningful interaction in and with the target language;
- an approach to teaching in which the tutor facilitates spoken and written student interactions at a level appropriate to the group of learners;
- recognition that student progress is enhanced by mastery of a range of learning techniques or strategies specific to the acquisition of foreign languages;
- the exceptional importance of aspects of learner psychology, particularly motivation, attitudes and anxiety: adults who are accustomed to being in comfortable control of their environment and of interactions with others must voluntarily, repeatedly and for long periods abandon the control that their native language normally affords them over relations with the outside world;
- the importance of identity: one's sense of self is intimately tied up with language, and acquiring a foreign language requires sustained acceptance of a change of identity to embrace otherness;
- sociocultural awareness allowing the learner to produce language which is not only technically adequate, but also appropriate to the circumstances of use;
- development of intercultural competence: a combination of attitudes and behaviours shown in adaptability and openness to new cultures and values.

SPECIALIST AND NON-SPECIALIST LINGUISTS

Portraits of the UK Modern Language undergraduate, whether ethnographic (Evans, 1988) or statistical (Coleman, 1996a) have concentrated primarily on the specialist, for whom languages represent all or most of the degree programme, and feature in its nomenclature. Within this category, the last thirty years have seen a shift away from Single Honours towards two languages or a combination of language and another discipline. The proportion of Single Honours students was only 25% of the 1994 cohort (Coleman, 1996a), fell to 15% by 2000 (The Nuffield Languages Inquiry, 2000: 54), and has continued to decrease (Kelly and Jones, 2003: 24).

However, thanks to the growth of the IWLP (Institution Wide Language Programme) movement, for more than a decade the majority of UK language students have in fact been majoring in other disciplines (Thomas, 1993; TransLang, 1997; Marshall, 2001). Central institutional provision for these students with a distinctive profile (Coleman, 1996b) emerged in the late 1980s as an efficient alternative to individual arrangements between Modern Language Departments and other specialisms. From 1991, annual IWLP conferences with published Proceedings charted the movement's progress. The challenges and conditions for success have been repeatedly addressed (e.g. Hartley, 1992; Coleman 1994), and a very well informed concise history of the IWLP movement, with a substantial bibliography, was published recently (Ferney, 2000).

But a *sine qua non* has always been high-level central backing, to ensure class contact time and accreditation. As financial pressures on UK universities led to devolved budgets, and other disciplines discouraged their students from following courses outside the home Department, the movement faltered (Sheppard, 2003). One respondent to an informal survey conducted by the University Council of Modern Languages in summer 2003 wrote sadly: 'The IWLP was abandoned when the institution went modular because the students no longer had an elective choice. The Faculties ring-fenced them', while the Standing Conference of Heads of Modern Languages in Universities, at its April 2002 AGM, had already recorded that the IWLP movement 'seemed to have ceased its existence'.

There is, however, a positive legacy within University Language Centres. Conceived originally as resource centres, they are now, in many institutions, stronger than the Modern Language Departments they previously serviced. In the UK, a straw poll of attenders at the 2003 meeting of the Association of University Language Centres (its largest ever) found 44 with expanding non-specialist student numbers, 2 steady, and only 1 with falling numbers. In October 2003 numbers were up again, typically by 10%-20%. Recruitment to Spanish is exploding, while Japanese and Chinese – and even German

after years of decline – are on the increase. Some Language Centres aim to recruit as much as 20% of the entire student body (Powell, 2002).

In a major power shift, Language Centres are increasingly supplying *all* the language classes for the institution – even where there are specialist degrees in Modern Languages. At some institutions, Modern Language Departments have dissolved, their academics absorbed into Cultural Studies, European Studies or Politics while the Language Centre delivers foreign language skills to the whole institution. The decline in traditional Modern Language Departments to the benefit of Language Centres can be seen across Europe. Founded in 1991 and now present in 22 countries, CercleS, the Confédération Européenne des Centres de Langues de l'Enseignement Supérieur (<http://www.cercles.org/>) promotes the interests of several thousand academic, administrative and technical staff and over 250,000 students, through national associations such as AICLU in Italy (45 member institutions), RANACLES in France (65 members) and Germany's AKS, oldest and largest of the national groupings with over 150 members.

The attractiveness of language learning to specialists in other disciplines is paralleled by the growth in part-time students. Since launching its first course in 1995, Britain's Open University has taught French, German or Spanish to more than 25,000 students. Current recruitment is above 7,000, of whom over 1,000 opted for online-only tuition.

Proficiency levels

One area in which the specialism of Language Centres in teaching languages (as opposed to the other 'content' domains of the Modern Languages curriculum) has borne fruit is in quantifying proficiency levels. The 1994 European Language Proficiency Survey (Coleman, 1996a) demonstrated incontrovertibly that the proficiency of the holder of a degree with a language in the title varies prodigiously. That the variation might be justified by the vast range of degree programmes available does not excuse a failure to say what those competence levels are in individual cases, for the benefit of graduates themselves and of their potential employers. Despite a good deal of progress in institutional documentation, including some incorporation of the UK's National Language Standards (<http://www.cilt.org.uk/qualifications/standards/index.htm>), and some impressive local initiatives such as that at Southampton where levels of proficiency are appropriately decoupled from year of study (see <http://www.lang.soton.ac.uk/cls/stages.html>), the Nuffield Report (The Nuffield Languages Inquiry,

2000: 57) had once again to call for a transparent common framework of assessment of target language proficiency.

More recently, however, the professionalisation of language teaching and its increasing location in Language Centres has seen widespread cross-referencing to the Council of Europe's Common European Framework of reference (Council of Europe, 1998), and frequent adoption of the European Language Portfolio (<http://culture2.coe.int/portfolio/>, cf. Davies and Jones, 2003; Forster Vosicki, 2000), with its positive impact on students' motivation and autonomy (Schärer, 2000; Little, 2003; Little and Lazenby Simpson, forthcoming).

CURRICULUM CHANGES AT TERTIARY AND SECONDARY LEVELS

A brief history of the introduction of Modern Languages into British universities (Coleman, 2001a: 121-123) stressed the debt to Ancient Languages, in regard to reflected prestige, curriculum content and pedagogical approach. The purpose of study was not practical proficiency – Classical Greek or Latin were not widely used in conversation at the start of the twentieth century – but rather a command of the written language in all its stylistic complexity and subtlety, acquired through deductive grammar and translation, in order to appreciate great literature in its original form. Both the aims and the teaching methods survived relatively unscathed into the 1960s, as a cycle developed in which prestigious departments attracted high-flying school-leavers, coached the most gifted through the literary canon to a First Class degree and a postgraduate bursary, then supported them into an academic post where they could in their turn pass on the knowledge, skills and approaches of literary criticism. New models of language degrees did emerge, especially after the creation of Britain's Polytechnics: designed to offer an alternative and more vocational model of higher education, many UK institutions were thus designated towards the end of the 1960s, a decade which also saw the creation of ten new universities on green-field sites, and of the distance-teaching Open University. Over the next twenty years, first Area Studies and European Studies, later Cultural Studies and Media Studies offered alternative pathways to students specialising in Modern Languages. The teaching of literature evolved too, from *explication de texte* and an unproblematic presentation of successive centuries of literary output as the highest form of linguistic expression and a morally and intellectually improving embodiment of national culture, to a critical questioning of creative processes and of the nature of cultures and identities. But in the UK, as in the rest of Europe, a Modern Languages degree has traditionally meant a diet of literature, whether students wanted it or not. Increasingly, perhaps as

Bassnett (2002: 102-103) suggests because of shorter attention span and diminished reading habits, they do not.

Curriculum mismatch and falling recruitment

The mismatch between what students sought and what academics were prepared to offer has been evident for well over a decade (Evans, 1988; Meara, 1994: 37). As an *ex-littéraire* myself, I have tended to labour the point (Coleman and Parker, 1992: 8; Coleman, 1996a: 25; Coleman, 2003: 18). So too did a far more distinguished French scholar: 'The teaching of literature does not do much to help students learn a language. [...] I don't think that many student tears would be shed if literature disappeared completely from the syllabus of most institutions of higher education' (Thody, 1990). Yet various factors have militated against this mismatch being addressed, not least complacency in a time of plenty. I wrote in 1992: 'At present, the nationwide boom in demand for language studies of all kinds is continuing to mask any student disenchantment with a predominantly literary syllabus' (Coleman and Parker, 1992: 10). Even in 1993, 'the very considerable expansion in numbers of language undergraduates' (Coleman and Rouxville, 1993: 5) meant that the profession had no need to be worried about the curricula it offered.

But recruitment to UK Modern Language Departments had in fact peaked at the same moment as British Europhilia, coinciding with the creation of the European Single Market in 1992. Since then, rising national xenophobia, actively promoted by much of the UK media, has accompanied a diminution and finally a collapse in the numbers of young people seeking to study for a degree in Modern Languages. Concern was already apparent in evidence submitted to the Nuffield Languages Inquiry in 1998 (Towell, 1998). The Nuffield's full report did not shrink from labelling the shortage of new students a 'crisis', recording departmental closures, steeply falling numbers in what had always been the two most popular foreign languages, French and German, and the near disappearance of Russian (The Nuffield Languages Inquiry, 2000: 55). Recruitment to Italian was low but stable, while Spanish even showed expansion, albeit from a low base; but the overall picture was of a sector in decline. By 2002, Spanish had overtaken German as the second most popular language after French, but departmental closures had accentuated the concentration of provision: a quarter of all specialist language students are now found in just five universities (Kelly and Jones, 2003: 24). Watts (2003) has explored the reasons for the falling interest in German studies.

Impact for university language study of changes in school curricula

Significant changes have also taken place in the school sector. In spring 2002, the Government published a consultative Green Paper on the curriculum for education at ages 14-19. Its proposal to remove a Modern Foreign Language from the list of core subjects in years 10 and 11 of compulsory schooling (ages 14+ to 16+) was justified by the desire to widen pupil choice and allow more freedom within the rigid National Curriculum. Many commentators saw instead a cynical move to address the severe shortage in the supply of secondary language teachers by cutting demand at a stroke. The proposal provoked almost universal opposition, based on the well-documented economic and social advantages to both individuals and the British nation of foreign language proficiency. Nonetheless, relying on a widespread but misconceived public perception that 'English is enough', and in defiance of European agreements to which the UK had signed up and which called for at least two foreign languages at school, the obligation to study a foreign language was reduced to the years between ages 11 and 14, when puberty is likely to make language learning least effective. The impact on university recruitment has yet to be fully felt, but can only make an already dire situation worse. The Government's National Languages Strategy (November 2002:

<http://www.dfes.gov.uk/languagesstrategy>) did seek to mitigate the national loss of language skills by introducing languages in primary schools in England (following a moderately successful Scottish initiative several years earlier) – but only as an 'entitlement', without adequate investment, and only from 2010.

An update on the take-up of Modern Languages at school and university published for Nuffield in February 2003 (Kelly and Jones, 2003) painted an even bleaker picture than in 2000. Ironically, it noted an 8% *rise* between 1992 and 2001 in numbers taking GCSE (the national examination taken at 16+ in England and Wales) in a foreign language, just as the core status which brought about the rise had been removed. Over the same ten-year period, however, entries in languages at A-level (the school-leaving exam taken at 18+) fell by 23%. The same reduction of 23% is recorded for university admissions – but over only four years (1997-2001), and despite a sharply increasing ratio of admissions to applications suggesting that anyone who wants to study languages at university can now find a place to do so. They will have a smaller choice of destinations, however: the annual straw poll conducted by the University Council of Modern Languages (UCML) at its summer 2003 plenary found, like its predecessors, more courses closed, languages axed, and staff dismissed or not replaced. Outside London and the South-East, degree courses in languages other than French, German and Spanish are

hard to find. Recruitment continued to decline in October 2003, with the balance between Single and Combined/Joint Honours unchanged.

Meanwhile, at school level, 60% of state comprehensive schools have already made languages optional a year before the legislation becomes statutory (CILT, 2003a), and an even higher proportion in disadvantaged areas. The change has resulted in more than half of fourteen-year-olds dropping languages, in a reduction in vocational and short-course options, and in a loss of interest in languages among younger (age 11-13) pupils.

Elitism

The only crumb of comfort in these trends has a sour taste. Perhaps the impact on university admissions in modern languages of removal from the core school curriculum will not be too severe, for a further characteristic of UK language students is their élitist profile. Whether measured by postcode, socio-economic class or proportion from fee-paying independent schools, language students come from a more comfortable background than students of any other university discipline except Medicine. They also have on average higher A-level (school-leaving) grades than in virtually any other discipline. Indeed, French and German at A-level have a higher proportion of top A grades than any other subject except Mathematics. So today's language recruits come from the brightest and most prosperous social groups, and with foreign languages flourishing alongside Latin in independent schools, who cares if less affluent youngsters remain monolingual?

To an extent, the same elitist argument applies at university level. The fall in recruitment to specialist language degrees has disproportionately damaged departments in universities with lower standing.

'Old' universities (i.e. those which acquired the *appellation* prior to 1992, the date at which the distinctive but less prestigious 'Polytechnic' designation was abandoned in favour of 'university') have always maintained their popularity with parents and employers. As their élite pool of self-disciplined, self-motivated, highly-qualified Modern Languages entrants started to dry up, they began to fish further downstream, in the reaches previously harvested by the better new universities (i.e. ex-Polytechnics), who in turn poached the applicants on whom other colleges had relied. Individual institutions, acting quite naturally without regard for national provision, and in the national tradition of extensive institutional autonomy, saw language recruitment falling and reduced provision accordingly, with closures, mergers and redundancies common currency since the late 1990s.

The place of literature

Ironically, although literature had come to occupy, in response to student demand, a less significant proportion of the university Modern Languages syllabus nationally, it is those departments which retain a high proportion of literature (in both research and teaching) which are surviving best, not because their curriculum meets student favour, but because they are located in 'research universities' which have traditionally enjoyed consumer confidence. Sir Alan Budd, provost of Queen's College Oxford, refers to universities as brands: 'If particular universities provide a label that commands a high value in the labour market, then that may be more important than the educational experience itself' (*Times Higher*, 24 October 2003). A correlation certainly exists between sustained recruitment to Modern Languages, literary research profiles of academic staff, and institutional membership of the Russell Group – a consortium of 'élite' Universities akin to Australia's Group of Eight, representing in some respects a putative British Ivy League. The departments which, in the late 1960s and 1970s, innovated through the introduction of Area Studies and Cultural Studies, are now vanishing as their more traditional but more prestigious competitors scoop up the remaining fish in a shrinking supply.

Even in high-status institutions, aka leading brands, there is now substantive evidence that Departments have had to respond to students' distaste for a literary syllabus – albeit unwillingly (Rodgers et al., 2002). Survey responses from 47 UK university French departments showed an accelerating reduction of the literary content of degrees, with fewer and shorter texts at every stage. Pre-twentieth century texts, poetry and drama have been squeezed out. The profession's resigned acceptance of the 'impoverished' diet was tied to external factors. Typically, the 'dumbing down' was attributed to the increase in student part-time paid employment and to modularisation of the curriculum to embrace a broader range of skills. Students' perception of literature as irrelevant within an instrumental, materialistic, vocational view of education was seen as being reinforced by the marginalisation of literature within a pre-university curriculum focused more on contemporary social issues. Familiarity with audiovisual media, and the move to a communicative approach to language teaching in schools are judged by academics in French Departments to be making students less comfortable with, if not actually hostile to, literary study. While respondents assign only moderate significance to employers and to competition with other universities, they link the changes to the wider range of courses on offer to students, and specifically to the pattern of student demand.

In the UK Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), the quality of a Department's research activity and output is graded by a panel of peers. The grade awarded determines the level of research funding for

the next several years. Respondents to Rodgers et al. acknowledge the widening gap between student interests and staff research. By analysing performance in the 1996 RAE (<http://www.hero.ac.uk/rae/rae96/>), Rodgers et al. established a link between the literary nature of a department's curriculum and a successful research rating. But while RAE income depends on excellence of (predominantly literary) research submitted to a (predominantly literary) research panel – and a review of the research outputs in 1994-2001 of academics in the surviving departments (at <http://www.hero.ac.uk/rae>) continues to show a predominance of publications in the domain of literary history – teaching income depends on student recruitment based on attractive (hence increasingly non-literary) courses.

Even as I write, a typical scenario is being played out in major UK universities. Academic staff in the Modern Languages Department are highly rated for their world-class research in literature, and derive a not insubstantial RAE income as a result. They have never been trained as language teachers, are contentedly unaware of the extensive research literature on advanced level language teaching, and resent spending time teaching language: it distracts them from research, and, now that the communicative approach in schools delivers entrants with less than total mastery of the grammatical system and its nomenclature, language classes consist largely of 'remedial' work 'at a level which we shouldn't be working at'. Yet they will not relinquish it to the trained professional staff in the very competent Language Centre because they need the income which derives from having all the students' credits registered in the Department. Research income alone cannot sustain them: they rely on the resources derived from teaching literature to ever fewer and more recalcitrant students, and from teaching language resentfully and perhaps ineffectively. The long-term outcome is inescapable – the younger generation of academics has less attachment to the target language as a disciplinary identity, and will happily settle in a Department of Comparative Literature or Media Studies, while the Language Centre already delivers *ab initio* teaching and less widely-studied languages – but we may wonder whether the paradoxical situation obtaining today is really in the students' best interests. Nor is this the only apparent contradiction in the Rodgers et al. survey. Respondents, while seeing student use of English translations as a 'dumbing down', overwhelmingly teach in English in order to maintain a high intellectual level (cf. McBride, 2000), arguing that 'the development of analytical skills must not be subordinated to the acquisition of linguistic skills'.

Thus, in the UK, the power of student choice in matters of curriculum content has slowly but inevitably eaten away at the dominant literary model of a Modern Languages degree, while student choice in matters of subject of study has simultaneously led to a reduction in overall numbers and a contraction of the sector to the extent that only the most prestigious departments survive – paradoxically, those possessing the most literary profile. At the same time, Government policy on the school curriculum has reduced still further the base from which future linguists will be drawn, and Government policy on the assessment and selective funding of university research has exacerbated the mismatch between supply – dictated by research specialisms – and student demand.

Graduate Employability

Faced with the incoherence of a partly market-led, partly policy-led recruitment crisis, university Modern Languages have responded by looking to graduate employability and to foreign language proficiency *qua* skill. Repeated studies show that graduate employers value skills most, and subject knowledge least (e.g. Coleman and Parker, 1992: 10; Harvey et al., 1997). Unfortunately, there is some evidence that the skills inculcated by traditional Modern Language degrees are a poorish match for the skills required in employment (Meara, 1994 for 1986 data; Coleman, 1996a: 116-123 for 1994 data). The campaign sought to dispel the myth that a language degree was good only for teaching, translating or interpreting – fewer than one graduate in ten follows such a ‘traditional’ language career, and 50% of all UK graduate jobs are open to any subject specialism. It also sought to promote the employability of language graduates, based on Higher Education Statistical Agency figures for unemployment six months after graduation (for 1996-2002 statistics see the website of the Subject Centre for Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies at <http://www.lang.ltsn.ac.uk/resources/resourcesitem.aspx?resourceid=1640>). Although more sophisticated measures of graduate jobs paint a less favourable picture (Kingston, 2003), employability remains a key argument (CILT, 2003b).

Teaching versus research

Teaching is the principal function of universities, the one which absorbs most of their public funding, and in the eyes of the general public almost their sole function. Part of the UK Government’s current discourse in favour of concentrating research in a minority of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), and limiting most university academic staff to teaching and scholarship without additional funding, is that excellent teaching should attract the prestige and career rewards currently reserved for research. Every

UK university has had to write a Learning and Teaching Strategy embodying this principle, and modest rewards are available under the Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund. Ten language projects supported by the Fund for the Development of Teaching and Learning in 1997-2001 made a measurable impact (Coleman 2001b), sustained by the very active Subject Centre for Language, Linguistics and Area Studies (<http://www.lang.ltsn.ac.uk>).

There exists nonetheless an equally prominent counter-discourse. It figures in the UK Government's White Paper of February 2003, and in the review of Research Assessment undertaken by Sir Gareth Roberts for the Funding Councils (<http://www.ra-review.ac.uk/>). It considers that a country can afford to fund only a few world-class universities to compete in the global Higher Education (HE) market.

Teaching, as the costly quality assurance process in the UK

(<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/revreps/reviewreports.htm>) has demonstrated, is of similarly good quality almost everywhere and so cannot distinguish one institution from another. Class is therefore defined above all by research, which will become the measure of quality of institutions, as it already is for individuals, whose promotion beyond normal career grades is very heavily dependent on research. So while one discourse ascribes equal prestige to teaching and to research, another uses research to rank universities. The Funding Councils verbally endorse the former, but their money is in the latter.

The paradoxical impact of the RAE

In Modern Languages, one perverse element of the RAE is the production of unemployable PhD students. The profile of prestige departments, as previously indicated, is predominantly literary-cultural. They attract the best students, encourage the *crème de la crème* to stay on for a Masters then a PhD, and receive both prestige (research student numbers are listed at the front of the RAE submission and are recognised as an important indicator of a department's standing in research) and direct pro rata funding for the research students. Unfortunately, the contraction of the sector means that there are no jobs for all these doctorated literary critics, as can be confirmed by an illustrative comparison of French PhD topics (<http://www.sfs.ac.uk/pglist.htm>) and academic language jobs (<http://jobs.ac.uk/sector/languages/>). In 2003, a single, temporary job teaching Italian in a new university attracted over thirty applications from Russell group graduates with PhDs. While some may see this as a production line with no attendant market, one insider has a different perspective. In reviewing yet another history of French literature, and in calling for a study of this proliferating genre, a distinguished professor asserts that 'the gap continues to widen between the research and teaching

needs of scholars, and the learning needs of students' (Birkett, 2003). Admittedly, the sentence finishes '... learning needs of students trained on ever-narrower examination syllabuses', but it would be interesting to hear a definition and defence of the 'teaching needs of scholars' when these are out of line with students' needs. It seems a perverse definition of Modern Languages if the students are there, at very considerable cost to themselves and to the nation, in order to meet the needs of the teachers rather than their own.

Besides, many of these institutions have already farmed out much undergraduate teaching to academic-related 'teaching fellows' in non-research posts, or else to postgraduates on their way to doctoral unemployment. As the President of the Royal Society recently asserted, one of the perverse consequences of the RAE is that it has become 'a unidimensional yardstick against which a Department's, and ultimately a university's, prestige is measured'. Consequently, 'it is arguably becoming a mark of status in some places to have minimum engagement with undergraduates. This is clearly bad for a university' (*Times Higher*, 1 December 2003).

Hire education

The availability of finance will inevitably continue to influence the fate of Modern Language Departments. The UCML 2003 straw poll confirmed once again that English for foreign students currently provides the main income stream for many Language Centres and Modern Language Departments – indeed a lifeline for not a few of the latter. However, now that universities across Europe and in key markets like China are switching to English-medium teaching, partly to facilitate student exchanges but principally to share in the fees bonanza of the global international student market, the £1 billion plus which the trade brings annually to the UK economy cannot be guaranteed. The British Government is currently seeking to replace the existing upfront universal tuition fee of £1125 for UK students by a variable fee of up to £3000 per annum, repayable through taxation once the graduate's income from employment tops £15,000 per annum. The proposal applies only to England and would be introduced in 2006. The shift from universal entitlement, largely funded from general taxation, to a personal investment whose dimensions are dictated by market forces has aroused huge controversy but the Government is sticking firmly to the principle of differential 'top-up' fees, arousing concerns that existing discrimination may be exacerbated as élite institutions and prestigious courses are reserved for the wealthy, while fear of debt deters the less well-off. Already, existing arrangements for financing higher education perpetuate class inequalities (DfES, 2003).

While the argument that introducing fees will increase participation by disadvantaged groups is disingenuous if not fallacious, and the argument based on higher lifetime earnings by graduates rests on unreliable data and dubious logic (as graduate numbers rise, the 'graduate salary premium' must reduce), it is harder to contradict the argument that national competitiveness in a global knowledge economy requires a highly educated workforce, and that the resources for HE expansion must come either from general taxation or from those who benefit directly. There are signals in many European countries that a move to significant tuition fees is being considered, while powerful nations including the USA, Australia, New Zealand and Japan are pressing, through GATS (General Agreement on Trade in Services) for unrestricted global trade in higher education. The impact can only be to enhance student consumerism and to accelerate the transition from supply-led to demand-led Higher Education. The October 2003 oration of Oxford University's Vice-Chancellor, Sir Colin Lucas, raised speculation that the venerable institution might leave the public sector entirely in order to 'compete with the world's best universities'. We are heading towards an international market in which supply exceeds demand and, as a consequence, students can choose where and what to study. National league tables have been a feature of student decision-making for more than a decade, and access to them has never been easier. Manchester's University Options, for example (<http://www.universityoptions.co.uk/>) is a gateway to several tables, some of them adaptable to the user's own hierarchy of criteria at the touch of a button. The global version is not far away.

Conclusion

It is clear that the pattern of university language teaching is changing and will continue to change. Like other subjects, its fate will hang on student choices in an increasingly globalised higher education market. The recognition that language skills as an adjunct to a professional degree bring real employability advantages should ensure the continuing success of Language Centres in delivering language skills to both specialists and non-specialists, while the employment advantages of 'a good degree from a good university' will ensure the survival of a few specialist Modern Language Departments, where top researchers continue to focus on literature while their students are taught a different and less demanding curriculum by teaching fellows and postgraduate students. Rather like the Classics Departments in whose image they were originally created.

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